

COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY

David Griffiths,  
Employment Division,  
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This paper represents the views of the author and is not, therefore, a position paper of the Employment Division.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the relevance of community economic development to the democratic socialist and full employment objectives of the Australian Labour Party (ALP). It is predicated on the assumption that whether or not the coming boom comes that there will be significant long-term large and/or small-scale economic and employment diseconomies.<sup>1</sup>

The democratic socialist and full employment objectives of the ALP are broad and bold ideological and theoretical assertions and, therefore, contentious and tenuous. Nonetheless, they provide an inescapable context for understanding the substantive and symbolic significance of the ALP's policies and programs.

The analysis that follows relies primarily on ALP policy documents - specifically documents used for the Victorian election in April, 1982 and the Federal Election in March, 1983. Other material from diverse sources has been utilised when it is considered that these complement and clarify the ALP policy documents. There are variations between the Victorian and Federal ALP documents but for the purpose of this analysis the similarities are more significant than the differences and, therefore, it is assumed that the critical assumptions, policies and programs are consistent and shared.

The ALP is a democratic socialist party and has the objective of the democratic socialisation of industry, production, distribution and exchange, to the extent necessary to eliminate exploitation and other anti-social features in these fields. Critical to this objective are the concepts of "redistribution of economic power", "social ownership" and "democratic control."<sup>2</sup>

The ALP is also "committed to restoring and maintaining full employment as a major policy priority."<sup>3</sup> The pursuit of full employment is considered to require "a broad range of progressive policies aimed at stimulating employment opportunities in the immediate and longer term, and ensuring that the Australian labour force is sufficiently adaptable to changing labour market conditions."<sup>4</sup>

The basis of these "progressive policies" is seen to be in the adoption of "a more expansionary and enlightened approach to macroeconomic policy in order to stimulate the level of economic activity and generate increased employment opportunities throughout the economy."<sup>5</sup> The dual aims of the ALP's "recovery and reconstruction" strategy are "restoring economic growth, and the simultaneous reduction of inflation and unemployment."<sup>6</sup> The final communique

of the economic summit recognised the importance of "the preservation of the private sector", the desirability of "maximum fiscal stimulus consistent with the need to reduce inflation and to avoid upward pressure on interest rates" and the need for "an effective incomes and prices policy" to an expansionary fiscal policy to avoid "adverse consequences for inflation."<sup>7</sup>

The limitations of an expansionist policy are, however, admitted and it is argued that "A large number of those who are currently most disadvantaged in the labour market and experiencing the most prolonged unemployment will not benefit from a general expansion in employment opportunities as the result of general expansionary policies."<sup>8</sup> It is proposed, therefore, to establish two major employment generating programs - a project based Community Works Program and a wage subsidy Private Sector Assistance Program."<sup>9</sup>

The economic and political realities are that in a situation of high unemployment business is able to reduce the power of unions and workers through disinvestment, the introduction of new and labor-saving equipment, reduced production of import-competing products, extending into non-manufacturing activities and shifting production off-shore. The net impact on workers is to reduce the number of jobs, deskill labour and shift control of work from workers to management.<sup>10</sup>

Technological change in particular addresses fundamental issues concerning economic growth and the control of work and workers. The pattern of preferred economic growth is familiar - high technology capital investment growth which is resource wasteful and environmentally damaging. High technology industries are commonly regarded as critical to economic growth. European Governments are, for instance, spending billions of dollars in an attempt to enable European companies to compete with Japanese and American companies.<sup>11</sup> But, then, while high technology enables economic growth, assists competitiveness and provides employment, it does not necessarily reduce unemployment and increase the net stock of jobs. High technology enterprises are capital intensive and more traditional labor-intensive enterprises are either closing down or rationalising their workforce.<sup>12</sup> In a survey of firms the NSW Science and Technology Council has reported that the major objective for the introduction of new technology for three quarters of the companies was cost reduction - principally labor cost reduction.<sup>13</sup> Behind cost reduction is the question of power and who controls work - workers and/or management. In a study of the introduction of micro-electronically controlled machines in engineering firms in the U.K. Wilkinson concluded that management saw the introduction of new technology as a way of gaining greater control over the pace and quality of work.<sup>14</sup>

The Victorian Premier, the Hon. J. Cain, M.P., has stressed the need to "address both the immediate problem of the recession and the fundamental long-term deterioration in Australia's economic prospects."<sup>15</sup> The final communique of the national economic summit recognised that Australia's "economic problems are deep-seated and not amenable to rapid solution" and that arresting and reversing this "decline demands the generation of high growth rates for long periods."<sup>16</sup> The three scenarios projected for the economic summit predicted respective unemployment rates of 8.7%, 9.7% and 12.2% in 1985-86.<sup>17</sup> Total unemployment rose from 392,800 in 1980-81 to 419,700 in 1981-82 and an average of 534,100 in the 12 months to February, 1983. By February, 1983 668,600 persons were unemployed measured on a seasonally adjusted basis.<sup>18</sup> It has been estimated that the average number of unemployment benefit recipients will be 700,000 in 1983-84, 770,000 in 1984-85 and 800,000 in 1985-86.<sup>19</sup> The ALP has acknowledged the long-term nature of its "recovery and reconstruction plan" by arguing the need to supplement expansionist policies "by a range of reconstruction initiatives to ensure that recovery continues" through improved access to finance, expanded assistance to small business, support for research and development and support for sunrise industries.<sup>20</sup> There will be no short-term reduction in unemployment. There is no strict correlation between increased economic growth, an increase in the stock of jobs and a reduction in unemployment. For unemployment to reduce employment needs to grow faster than the labour force - employment growth of approximately 2.9% per annum requires a sustained increase in the rate of growth of output of perhaps 5% per annum - twice the average of the last seven years.<sup>21</sup>

The essential point about expansionist policies, the prices and income accord, the national economic summit communique and targetted employment programs is that they are designed to complement and extend rather than challenge the system of private ownership and control and, therefore, attempt to influence indirectly rather than directly capital investment and production decisions.

While these policies and programs could positively contribute to economic and employment growth there are inherent structural limitations which constrain and limit the breadth and depth of their impact. The expansion of the public sector and increased public expenditure are critical whatever economic and employment growth. Both Groenewege<sup>22</sup> and Sheehan<sup>23</sup> have defended the public sector from conservative critics. Groenewegen argues,<sup>24</sup> for instance, that since mid 1974-75 contraction of the public sector, especially capital spending, increased unemployment. Sheehan argues that the surge in

Australia's budget deficit in 1974 was a response to rather than a cause of economic problems.<sup>25</sup>

Democratic socialisation and full employment will not be achieved simply through new, different and better macro-economic policies. Demand management remedies will not in themselves restore the possibility of full employment. There is a need, therefore, to develop a complementary approach which is consistent with democratic socialism and which will create additional work opportunities. Whatever the direction, rate and level of public expenditure regional and local communities are experiencing differently the problems of the flight of capital, the loss of business activity and a decline in the skill base.

Because of the "magnitude" of the economic and employment crisis it is acknowledged by the ALP that "it will be necessary to develop more radical avenues for creating additional work opportunities."<sup>26</sup> The Commonwealth Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Senator Susan Ryan, has argued that "the conventional work force will not expand enough to absorb everybody who needs a job. It is time to look seriously at alternatives."<sup>27</sup>

Three potential radical avenues have been designated by the ALP for investigation and development - worker co-operatives, rural-based communal projects and self-employment.<sup>28</sup> These possibilities are contingent on being "viable avenues for improving employment opportunities" which "allow greater flexibility in working patterns without detriment to the availability and conditions of full-time work."<sup>29</sup> Quite obviously, however, the cited examples of worker co-operatives, rural-based communal projects and self-employment constitute indicative possibilities rather than systematic and coherent policies and programs. It is important to neither over nor under-estimate the policy and/or program significance of these posited alternative approaches.

Community economic development, however, provides a complementary additional/supplementary approach. Community economic development could be defined as community and/or worker ownership and/or control of enterprises and investment.

Community economic development programs and/or projects are not a new approach to employment and economic development. In the U.K., for instance, a Community Development Project was established in 1969.<sup>30</sup> These were action research projects under the auspices of local authorities and universities or polytechnics who were commissioned to identify community development needs and develop appropriate projects. The process of analysis, however, led to the

conclusion that the problem was the private control of capital which was not specific to localities and this led to conflicts between projects and Central and Local Governments and, therefore, the Project was terminated in the late 1970's. In recent years in the U.K.<sup>31</sup> left-aligned local governments have established Economic Policy Units/groups/Departments to develop and implement interventionist strategies to save and create jobs. In the U.S.A. it is generally accepted<sup>32</sup> that government has a role in community economic development. There are diverse programs for assisting community economic development activities<sup>33</sup> - EDA's Comprehensive Development Strategy (CEDS) program, the Commerce Department's Commerce/Cities program and the Neighbourhood Business Revitalisation (NBR) program.

There are three major criticisms of community economic development and these concern its:

- . Effectiveness.
- . Competitiveness.
- . Contradictions.

It is argued that local areas and/or enterprises have a limited impact on the level and/or rate of economic and employment growth in local areas and that the solution to these problems lie with the policies and programs of national governments.<sup>34</sup> It is true that community economic development cannot be considered independent of its relationship to the State, national and international economy<sup>35</sup> - the nature and impact of class inequalities, technical and structural change and the international division of labor. As Stilwell contends<sup>36</sup> it is necessary to examine the complex inter-relationship between economic crises and spatial distribution of economic and social activities - the inter-relationships between international, national, metropolitan and non-metropolitan, national and state, regional and urban, urban and intra-urban.

There are contradictory views on the possibilities for fundamental economic and social change<sup>37</sup> - the point of production (the workplace) and/or the point of reproduction (the community). Community economic development confronts and reconciles the production/reproduction dilemma by involving unions and workers (production) and communities (reproduction). Community economic development recognises that the possibilities for any alternative restructuring of the economy depends on political commitment and organisation and that a critical basis for developing this commitment is identifying and

responding to local economic and employment needs at a local level through worker and/or community enterprises which express different ideological and economic assumptions.

It is also argued that community economic development could provoke polarisation within and between communities and/or enterprises as they compete for jobs and money.<sup>38</sup> But to state this is to adopt a conventional approach to community economic development and assume that the economic divisiveness of existing communities competing for public and private sector is inevitable. What is true is that communities using the conventional assumption that the source of economic growth is conventional enterprises succeed in competing against each other and diverting energy and resources from common issues and problems. Goodman has argued<sup>39</sup> that in the U.S.A. 15,000 public entrepreneurs make economic competition the burden of ordinary people and economic co-operation the privilege of corporate businesses. In the context of urban planning, Sandercock argues<sup>40</sup> that capitalist manipulation and corruption has resulted in disproportionate influence for property owners and polluting industries because of their unequal resources, their power to acquire and maintain these resources and a cultural acceptance of their dominance. But, competition is neither inevitable nor necessarily divisive if communities and/or enterprises adopt co-operative planning principles and practices within and between areas. This possibility depends on recognising that the social and political objectives of community and/or worker owned and/or controlled business enterprises are qualitatively different.

It is finally argued that when private sector based enterprises have already failed to provide jobs it is a contradiction to expect new enterprises with the same viability objectives to achieve different outcomes.<sup>41</sup> Co-operatives funded by the Victorian and New South Wales Governments are demonstrating new forms of worker and/or community ownership and/or control of workplaces work.

While the Victorian and N.S.W. experience is embryonic and limited, it is providing a basis for developing a new collective (worker and/or community) entrepreneurial network of enterprises committed to economic viability, the democratisation of work and workplaces and the provision of socially useful products and services. The significance of these collective alternatives will not necessarily be understood and accepted, however, as it could be expected that conventional business practitioners and their ideologues (e.g. business consultants) will oppose the economic and organisation appropriateness of these alternatives. The more sophisticated opponents will claim, for

instance, that there is a self-defeating conflict between commercial and social/political objectives and that the existence of these social/political objectives undermine and ultimately negate commercial viability. The dismissal of alternative enterprises could be based on claimed neutral and objective characteristics of all business enterprises - conventional business enterprises. But, then, the basis of the analysis and conclusion is ideologically pre-determined and determined. Existing and extended enterprise experiments could provide focal points for the widespread democratisation of work and workplaces by assisting unions, workers and communities to understand, define and interpret the business principles and practices of conventional business enterprises. Without this understanding, it is not possible to effectively challenge the assertion that conventional business assumptions and procedures are natural and inevitable.

The arguments for community economic development could be summarised as being:<sup>42</sup>

1. The maintenance and creation of jobs in local communities.
2. The production and provision of goods and services by and within local communities.
3. Local ownership and control of local work and workplaces.
4. Influencing the nature and rate of economic and employment growth within local communities.
5. Providing practical experience and knowledge in economic and enterprise development for communities/groups and/or workers.
6. The control and usage of local wealth by and within local communities.

It is critical, therefore, to develop comprehensive, concrete and achievable Community Economic Development alternatives.<sup>43</sup> Hartnett has argued the need for workers to develop corporate plans.<sup>44</sup> Alford has also argued for workers developing alternative plans.<sup>45</sup> Sandercock has argued the critical importance of industrial democracy and social ownership.<sup>46</sup> Windschuttle has argued that workers' control is essential.<sup>47</sup> These ideas, however, remain to be developed.

Comprehensive alternatives need to be understandable and acceptable to trade unions, workers and communities. Concrete alternatives need to be real and tangible possibilities and not theoretical and abstract concepts.



Achievable alternatives need to have objectives that can be accomplished and finished within an agreed time span. What, then, are these comprehensive, concrete and achievable objectives? The alternatives are dependent on the twofold complementary strategies of democratising companies and investment:

(1) Company Ownership and Control<sup>48</sup>

While it is generally desirable to democratise work and workplaces, it is difficult to directly confront conventional business enterprises without provoking considerable business and community opposition. The encouragement of democratisation, therefore, depends primarily on persuasion and incentive.

A concrete possibility for direct Government sponsored democratisation, however, lies with viable companies which would otherwise close but for Government intervention. The reasons for company closures are diverse and they are not necessarily because of decreased viability and profitability. Closure could result from the retirement of the owner, ineffective and inefficient management, the decision of a large company to rationalise its operations or the purchase of a parent company by a competitor. Closure, therefore, would result in a decline of economic activity, a decrease in the stock of jobs, increased levels of unemployment and a reduction in community income. Worker and/or community ownership and/or control of these companies could, therefore, obviate these consequences. In both N.S.W. and Victoria Labor Governments have established and/or developed co-operative programs which are encouraging the conversion of existing companies into co-operatives. The Victorian Government has a broadly stated policy of encouraging employee owned business enterprises.

(2) Investment Ownership and Control<sup>49</sup>

Private sector investment by companies, banks and other financial institutions is dependent on the rate of return and the risk factor. What is the most profitable and safest investment, however, is not necessarily consistent with social, economic and employment needs. It is desirable, therefore, to influence the rate and direction

of investment. But, then, it is not politically practical to even seek significant control of conventional private investment sources. There is scope, however, to appropriately encourage socially useful investment through location and/or work based credit co-operatives whose funds are owned and controlled by local residents and/or workers and whose funds are at present loaned to these residents and/or workers. Credit co-operative funds could be channelled into local worker and/or community owned and/or controlled business enterprises and, thereby, control of local investment and production would be locally and/or worker based and determined. The Collingwood-Richmond-Fitzroy credit co-operative, for instance, is considering developing into a community bank which would provide loans to enterprises as well as individuals. This possibility would appear to require legislative amendment to the Co-operation Act 1981. It would appear that Part III Division 11 Section 58 of the Act restricts membership of credit societies to individuals and loans can only be made to members of societies.

These possibilities are constrained, however, by political, economic and organisational conservatism. Unlike Canada and the U.S.A. Australia does not have a significant experience of community economic development. This is reflected by the conservative welfarist assumptions dominating the current debate on short and long-term job creation. Job creation tends to be viewed as employability and training experience for the unemployed rather than a contribution towards economic development and/or an alternative economic strategy and/or an alternative economy. The cultural and ideological hegemony and dominance of conventional enterprises results in a consonance factor. With the consonance factor alternative community and/or worker business enterprises are judged in terms of their fit or consonance with pre-existing business enterprises and, therefore, their alternativeness is defined as inappropriate.<sup>50</sup> There is still a substantive opinion that private sector jobs are real-work and that public sector jobs are make-work. Unlike Italy, France and the U.K. Australia does not have a co-operative movement with a traditional and developed relationship with the labor movement. Unlike the U.S.A., France, Italy and the U.K. Australia does not have a labor movement

that has a long, consistent and developed position and involvement in community economic development and/or co-operative.

There are three critical considerations:

1. The desirability of co-operatives and community economic development as preferable forms of enterprise and economic organisation because of their democratising potential and impact on work, workplaces and economic development and because of their marrying of social and economic objectives and practices. Competition, enterprise and job substitution are relevant considerations for political and strategic rather than in principle purposes.
2. Viable co-operatives and community economic development depend on the development of long-term commitments by participants who accept that the conventional public and private sectors are unable to generate sufficiently the economic development and employment opportunities required. Co-operatives and community economic development need to be recognised and accepted as direct economic and enterprise challenges to conventional enterprises and economic assumptions.
3. Economic growth potential industries should be identified and consideration given to the desirability and possibility of these industries being fostered as co-operative and community economic development models. In particular, the possibilities for alternative energy and technology need to be examined and developed. In contrast, it would appear that the conventional public and private sectors are promoting capital-intensive high technology.

The appropriate infrastructure for the democratisation of companies and investment could be diverse and dependent on individual local area and/or enterprise conditions. Proposals for the establishment of a Co-operative Development Agency are being formulated as a basis for the future organisation and direction of the Ministry's Co-operative Development Program. But, then, the co-operative focus of a Co-operative Development Agency could be its

weakness as well as its strength. While a Co-operative Development Agency might appropriately encourage the establishment and/or development of co-operatives on a Statewide basis, for local areas it may be more appropriate to establish a more broad-based agency with a broader community appeal and an ambit that includes but is not exclusive to co-operatives. There is also a need to consider the appropriate role of trade unions, local government, regional organisations and private enterprise.

Critical to the viability of community economic development would be scale, resources and lead-time. A large-scale program with inadequate resources and a limited time span would build-in the ingredients of failure. A small-scale program with appropriate resources over a long time span would be cost effective.

There are, then, many ideological, conceptual, political and economic issues and questions that need close and hard analysis. These issues would include full employment, the right to work and the right not to work, the dual economy and/or labor market, the nature of economic growth, capital-intensive and labor-intensive enterprises and/or technology, de-skilling and de-industrialisation, the characteristics and dynamics of enterprises, the role of government in the operations of the economy, industrial and economic democracy and the guaranteed minimum income.

Hopefully, this paper has provided a basis for accepting the necessity and desirability of further exploration. It is important, however, to conduct this exploration on the basis of realistic expectations and not expect too much too soon.

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